

David Cayley

Good evening and welcome to *Ideas*. I'm David Cayley.

Education has always been controversial. In his Politics, Aristotle already records a disagreement about the proper purpose of education. People can't agree, he says, about what the young should learn. They disagree about whether education should be about the formation of character or the training of the intellect. And they debate about whether useful abilities, or what Aristotle calls "higher accomplishments" are more important. Two millennia later, these questions persist and, beginning tonight, we take them up again in a new 15-hour series called "The Education Debates." During the course of this series, I'll look at issues ranging from multiculturalism and moral education to home schooling and school choice. Later programs will also examine the situation of Canadian universities.

But the series starts and continues for six nights with a survey of current issues in primary and secondary education. At the moment, there's a widespread opinion that something's wrong with our public schools. Public opinion polls in Ontario a few years ago found that two-thirds of those asked expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of schools. Many provinces have already begun to reform education. Tonight's program attempts an assessment of the case for school reform. It begins with three vignettes in which a former student, a parent and a teacher indicate what they think is wrong with public education. The former student is Sarah Martin, a young colleague of mine here at the CBC, who was educated in the public schools of West Toronto during the 1980s. When she learned that I was preparing a series of broadcasts on education, she told me this story.

Sarah Martin

In Grade XI English class, our teacher came in after we'd handed in a bunch of papers and looked around at the class and was very appalled and gave us a bit of a grammar lesson. She said that our writing skills were just deplorable and that it was not right of us to think that we could hand this kind of material in. And so I went up to her and I said, Mrs. Fiksel, what can I do? What do you do if you're in this kind of situation when you've been taught some things, but you don't really have the tools to write a really good essay using good English. And she said, "Follow me," and we left the classroom and walked down this hallway to this closet that was locked. She unlocked it and went in to this closet full of old textbooks and pulled down this brown textbook from the seventies that said "Mastering Effective English." She handed it to me, and she said, "Now, technically this is school property, but you can have it because we don't use it any more." And I said, "Well, what is it?" And she said, "It's a high school grammar book. It's essentially English usage, but we don't use them any more. So keep it and do some of the exercises at home if you're truly interested."

David Cayley

The dusty grammar books in Mrs. Fiksel's closet became a sign to Sarah Martin of the academic training she ought to have received but never did. She did do the exercises, but she continued to feel that her educational foundations were shaky. When she moved to Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, she once again faced disappointed teachers.

Sarah Martin

All the way through first, second, third and fourth year English courses, there was some point in the year, whether it was September or January or even the end of the term, when the teacher would really wring their hands and look at the class and say, "I don't understand how you people have come this far in your education and you can't structure a sentence properly and you have no idea what a

dangling participle is.” And we’d have to sit there and admit that really, fundamentally, we didn’t know what we were doing.

David Cayley

Sarah Martin graduated from Mount Allison in 1995 and is now working in the newsroom of CBC Radio. She says that she’s having to learn on the job elements of style, syntax and grammar that she ought to have been introduced to in elementary school.

Sarah Martin

There was a sense that it would be automatic and that’s what we were told, that we would automatically, intuitively learn these things by reading and just by going through the different levels of education. But I think that there’s more to it than that. I think that it requires a certain amount of training. It’s not that I have ever wanted to go to military college or anything like that, but I do believe that a certain amount of systematic teaching would have made sense and put me at a better place. So I feel that, in that sense, the system has failed me personally. I don’t like learning that I’m missing fundamental skills that you need at this point, at this stage in your life.

David Cayley

One of the things that Sarah Martin noticed in university was the difference between students who had gone to private schools and those, like her, who had come through the public schools. The private school graduates seemed to her, not just to know more about history or literature or whatever, but to possess a more coherent, more integrated body of knowledge.

Sarah Martin

So many of the subjects that you are taught link together, but the approach that we were given that was different was that the subjects were not presented as subjects that went together. They were separate and you could choose them separately. And if you didn’t want to take History after grade IX, you didn’t have to, because it didn’t have anything to do with the other subjects that you were taking. They’re all individual islands, whereas with other people, it’s a continent, it’s a whole body.

David Cayley

Sarah Martin has concluded that when knowledge is not integrated it is not accessible. What has been taught remains available only when it has been assimilated to a living body of knowledge. And therein, she thinks, lies the chief problem with the progressive, activity-centred primary school and the cafeteria high school in which she was educated. She was supposed to be at the centre of this education, choosing, constructing, and assembling knowledge according to her own purposes. But there was no model, no authority and no guidance as to how she should do it.

Sarah Martin

I guess that you get a bit angry at the end. You’ve gone to school for so many years, you don’t question the fact that every September you’re entering school and you just keep going and going and going and then once you stop you look back and think, I’ve participated in this all this way and the onus was on me to decide what I would do and how I would make it work for me. But wait a second.

Couldn’t someone have said, at some point, wait a second, I think you should step to the left a little bit, and that might help you a little bit more in the future? So it’s just a feeling of having been a little bit abandoned by it.

David Cayley

My second story comes from a parent who became one of the leaders of the campaign for school reform in Ontario. It begins in the fall of 1988, when Maureen Somers enrolled her son Adam in Grade I at a Peterborough public school. As the academic year progressed, she became worried that he wasn't learning to read. She contacted his teacher and was told that there was no cause for concern — Adam was just learning at his own pace. She was not reassured and that summer began teaching Adam to read herself, using a purchased program of instruction in phonics. In Grade II, his progress stalled again. She visited his classroom and found an unfamiliar scene.

Maureen Somers

I had asked about readers. There were no readers in the classroom. The children were allowed to pick reading material from the school library or books that happened to be in the classroom. And I had also noticed this in Grade I. Many of the children were encouraged to participate in child-centred learning activity centres that were set up in the classroom. They were encouraged to go to the math centre or to the reading centre or to this or to that. And the children were just going from here to there doing whatever they chose to do that day in that activity centre.

David Cayley

This was not what Maureen Somers remembered as school, and not what she had expected for her son. At her own rural primary school, where her father had been the principal, reading and other fundamentals had been taught by direct instruction. What she gradually discovered during her dealings with her son's school were radically different assumptions about how children learn. Public education had changed, but no one had told her.

Maureen Somers

It took me until mid-Grade II to realize I was not going to get any help from this particular teacher, nor obviously from the teacher before. And I started questioning my own sanity, whether I was imagining things, whether I really didn't understand the system as I had been told by this teacher. I just didn't understand. My expectations were too high of my son. And I remember saying to her one day, "Listen, I don't expect my son to be a straight A student, but I am concerned and I do expect him to know how to read, how to write, how to spell and to do basic mathematics. I think it would be in his best interest, as well as yours, that he know how to do this, and I'm here to tell you that he's not doing well at this at all. And I'm concerned." Didn't get anywhere. I started talking to other mothers in the community and realized I wasn't the only one with these concerns. They had very similar stories. And the system has the tendency of conquering and dividing parents. There's never any indication that there were a dozen parents complaining before you. Anyway, after speaking with many others in the community, I realized I wasn't the only one. So I called a meeting and parents came. We had 17 parents at our first meeting. And lo and behold, they all had children in the same grade. A few had children in Grade III. And their concerns and complaints were similar to mine. Their kids couldn't read.

David Cayley

These parents decided to organize. They began by holding a meeting with the principal and superintendent of the school.

Maureen Somers

It was there at this meeting that I and the other parents were informed that we did not understand the present system and the school that our children were attending. The school is and was a

child-centred whole language school. That was the philosophy of this school. And the superintendent said to me that reading is natural. Children learn to read as naturally as they learn to speak. And my response to that was that reading is a skill that must be taught. And she in turn said to me, "No, no, no, you don't understand. Psychologists have said this, and researchers said that." So I asked for the research, and she was not able to name it or give it to us. So what came out of that meeting was a two-year battle with the Peterborough County Board of Education, 29 bureaucratic meetings, and by that I mean meetings in which we met with the director of the school board, we met with the chairman of the board, we met with all the trustees of the board. We made dozens of presentations before the entire board of trustees, bringing to their attention that we have a problem in this particular school, that problem being we have large numbers of children who cannot read and we would like something done about it.

David Cayley

During the course of these many meetings, Maureen Somers' distaste for the reigning philosophy of education increased. She disliked being patronized and she disliked the education system's lack of accountability for its results.

Maureen Somers

I had asked, at a meeting, to see the school board's curriculum for the elementary grades, particularly for that school. We discovered there wasn't any curriculum for the primary grades, which would be JK to Grade III. And my response to that was, how do you know what grade level anybody is at? You haven't a curriculum, you have no means of assessing whether these children are progressing. Who determines where these children are in their learning? And the response at the time was based on the philosophy of the school, meaning the child-centred philosophy. We can't determine at any particular moment where the children are in their learning because according to the child-centred whole language philosophy, children learn at their own pace. Learning could take place at any moment, but we're not always sure, okay? So a lot of the report cards that were coming out of that school at the time, and many schools in the province, were based on subjective observations and opinions of that teacher of that particular grade. So she was determining on her own, subjectively, where my son was or wasn't in his reading abilities. And when I discovered that, I got really angry about it. I don't want somebody's subjective opinions of where they think my son is in math or reading or spelling. I would prefer to have an objective assessment of some sort. That wasn't going on in the school at the time, nor was it going on in many schools in the province at the time.

David Cayley

Objective assessment became the primary issue between the parents and the Peterborough Board of Education. For two years, the parents reiterated their demand that the 24 children in question be tested. Finally, when they were in Grade IV, the Board agreed. The results vindicated the parents.

Maureen Somers

Twelve of these students were reading at a Grade II level. Some of them, in fact, were reading below a Grade II level. Their reading and their spelling abilities were anywhere between a Grade II level and a Grade I level. Many of them couldn't do basic mathematics past Grade I.

David Cayley

By the time these tests were done, Maureen Somers had already moved her son to another school. But she remained involved in the issue and went on to become one of the leaders of a province-wide

campaign for a more rigorous and accountable education system. The Ontario government's current program of school reform reflects the popular movement she helped to create.

David Cayley

My final account of the failure of the education system comes from a retired teacher, Professor Jack Granatstein. Over the last 30 years, he has watched high school history suffer the same fate as the grammar books that sat gathering dust in Mr. Fiksel's closet. This year, he spoke out in a book called Who Killed Canadian History? A prolific writer on Canadian history himself, and for many years a professor at York University, Granatstein now works in Ottawa as the Director of Canada's War Museum. During the course of his career, he has seen Ontario high schools move from requiring five courses on history to only one. Canadians now regularly fail the little history quizzes administered to them by pollsters. The culprits in the murder of Canadian history, Granatstein says, are both pedagogical and constitutional.

Jack Granatstein

I think that the main cause of our problems in the teaching of history in our public and high schools is the Constitution of Canada, which gives control over education to the provinces, which guarantees that you have ten different ways of doing everything, not just history. And which almost by definition, forces on the school system a regional, at best, or a provincialist, at worst, approach to the past. And that is antithetical to the idea of nation. And I think that that is a disaster that we are going to pay a very serious price for. So I think the Constitution has hurt us. Then there's the school administrators, who bought into every 1960s fad and who are holding tight to them and are able to still impose their will on their political masters all across the country. I think that's the next major factor. I know that in Ontario the Tory government, not my favourite government by any means, came into power determined to do major things to the school curriculum, including compulsory history all the way through. And essentially they lost to the bureaucrats who basically said, oh, history's too hard, can't do that. There's no right answer. It'll offend somebody. We'd better not do it. And so we end up with very little on the Canadian past in the public and high schools of Ontario. I don't think this makes any sense. But that's what happens.

David Cayley

The study of history, Jack Granatstein thinks, is vital to the well-being of a democratic society in at least two crucial ways. First, it gives us a sense of where we've come from and the path we've followed. This knowledge can then ground and inform present judgements, giving them a depth and sobriety that they might otherwise lack. Second, it teaches respect for evidence, for the fact that history happened and cannot be altered. This respect, Granatstein says, is now eroding as we become, in his phrase, "a nation without a past." There are signs that we are increasingly willing to rewrite history according to the convenience of the present. He sees this tendency at work, for example, in Parliament's recent rehabilitation of Louis Riel, who was hanged for treason in 1885. Every generation ought to revise its understanding of its past, he says, but only within limits.

Jack Granatstein

I am a revisionist. I'm someone who has gone around challenging the accepted view on this subject or that subject, trying to interpret it in a different way. And that's right and proper and necessary. But it is important that this be done with some due regard to what happened — to fact, to truth. And

if you can change history, what's the difference between us and the Soviets, who used to delete people from their encyclopaedias and from their consciousness because they went out of ideological favour? If we can do the same thing with Riel, is there any difference between what we're doing and what they did? It seems to me respect for truth and fact is fundamental in a democracy, in an intellectual life, in a society that knows where it came from and that has some sense of where it wants to go.

David Cayley

Jack Granatstein's sense that Canadians are developing a shallow, sentimental, self-righteous and somewhat opportunistic attitude to the past is founded in his own recent experience. During the years of the Mulroney government, he became involved in the question of whether Canada owed Japanese-Canadians an apology for the way they were treated during the Second World War. As a result of the questions he raised, he says, he was called, in so many words, a bigot.

Jack Granatstein

The Mulroney government decided it wanted, for political reasons and for idealistic reasons, to offer redress to Japanese-Canadians. There's no doubt in my mind that 95% of the 23,000 Japanese-Canadians in Canada in 1941-42 were treated abysmally. Their property was stolen from them. They were treated like dirt. They were moved out of their homes and shipped into the interior. They were treated abysmally. But the simple truth is that the Japanese government considered them all to be Japanese citizens, that the Japanese Consulate in Vancouver was actively recruiting spies among Japanese-Canadians. And the Canadian government, knew this because it had seen the telegram that had been sent from Japan to the Consulate. There is no doubt that Japanese-Canadians were running newspapers that actively supported Japan in its war with China, up until December 7, 1941. And it probably asked too much of people to say, yesterday you were supporting Japan; today now you say you're loyal to Canada. How can I believe that? So the Canadian government, in part because the population on the west coast was frightened silly of the prospect of a Japanese invasion — and that was a real prospect until at least the end of 1942 — felt that it had to act. And so it moved the Japanese-Canadians off the coast, out of their livelihoods and stuck them into the interior of British Columbia. They weren't interned. They were able to leave the interior and move further east. But they weren't allowed to go back to their homes on the coast. This was appalling in a democracy that this should happen. I have not the slightest doubt that this was so. But it's not my job to pass moral judgements. It's my job as a historian to try to understand why an otherwise sensible government acted the way it did. Why otherwise sensible Canadians were as frightened as they were. And only if you rule out whole categories of evidence, like Japanese government telegrams, like the activities of the Consulate, like the newspapers produced by Japanese-Canadian, only if you leave those things out can you come to any other conclusion, in my view, than that the Canadian government, while it acted badly, had some reason to act. And that's what I mean by considering all of the evidence. I know that I looked at more evidence than anyone else on the question of Japanese-Canadians. I had a really first-class researcher who found all sorts of stuff that no one had ever found before. And to be attacked by people who hadn't read the material and who refused to believe it, even when it was presented to them, I found exceedingly galling. I found it completely ahistorical. I found it being willing to abandon history and historical accuracy for the sake of political positions or caring for their neighbours. That's fine. I'm in favour of caring for my neighbour. But I also think it's important to stick to the facts, too.

David Cayley

In Jack Granatstein's view, the Canadian government was half-right in offering redress and apology to Japanese Canadians expropriated during the war. Redress for stolen property was certainly deserved, he says. But what the government failed to do was to offer any account of why its predecessor had acted as it did in 1942. The complex circumstances in which Mackenzie King's government acted were collapsed into a caricature and racism was allowed to stand as the sole explanation. To Granatstein, this willingness to slander those who have gone before us is both a moral and an educational failing. Schools, he says, now often teach only the history of the oppressed and excluded when they teach history at all, and offer no larger view about what is good about Canada's existence. He gives as an example the case of an eight-year-old son of two old friends of his from the Maritimes. The boy is enrolled in a private school, where he has written five brief historical reports. Their subjects were the extinction of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland, Samuel de Champlain's mistreatment of his child bride, the tribulations of Canada's first woman doctor, Emily Stowe, the hanging of Louis Riel, and the abuse of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. This relentless emphasis on injustice, Granatstein says, distorts the past and belies the country's accomplishments.

Jack Granatstein

I'm in favour of Canadians knowing about their history, warts and all. I have no doubt that that is important. Yes, we have made terrible mistakes and we should know about them. But I also think that this is arguably the most successful society in the world. It has, by and large, integrated people from all across the globe with amazing success. It's produced a very good life for the vast majority of its people in rather a forbidding climate. It has solved its grievances, by and large, peaceably. And it has been able to do all this through political skill, through public will, through caring for its citizenry. This is a remarkable success story, this country. And the idea that a teacher in a class, in a private school class, with obviously the children of the well-off, would spend time saying here are our atrocities, here are our sins. This is what your country is. It abuses women, it abuses minorities, it hangs people who are merely trying to fight for their people, it discriminates on the basis of religion, race and gender. What kind of a lesson does that send? What does that say to children? What does that say to an eight-year-old kid? Frankly, when my friend showed me these essays, I had never been more appalled by what is going on in our school system than I was that day. It was absolutely terrifying to me.

David Cayley

These three short sketches of three very different people can hardly represent the full spectrum of dissatisfaction with public education but they give at least the gist of a widespread opinion, which is that our public schools and high schools are not giving their students the solid academic foundation they ought to have. This view acquired a national platform in the early 1990s when Andrew Nikiforuk became the education columnist for The Globe and Mail. Nikiforuk had trained as a teacher at York University's Faculty of Education, an experience he disliked, he says, because of its paternalism, "grinding anti-intellectualism" and a predominance of therapeutic over educational aims. Four subsequent years as a special education teacher in Toronto and Winnipeg confirmed his impression that what he called a "catastrophe" was in progress in public education. When he began to write for the Globe, his column quickly became a lightning rod for popular dissatisfaction with the schools. Maureen Somers' story of the Peterborough fourth graders who could barely read was first publicized there. And reading was a key issue for a lot of parents, he says. Instinctively, they rejected the prevalent idea that reading will come naturally and at its own pace.

Andrew Nikiforuk

It didn't take parents long to figure out that this was something very much against what the school system should be about. It should be about putting all kids on equal ground, which means that you teach them all how to read by the end of Grade I. You don't let a third of your class spontaneously learn how to read and the other two-thirds feel like a bunch of failures because they require instruction, practice, drill, whatever, and not do anything about it. But every time a parent came up and protested this, school officials basically said, look, you don't understand, you don't realize what we're doing here. You're just a parent. Things have changed since you went to school. Go home. We're the professionals; we know what we're doing. And that's what really started the revolt.

David Cayley

The reforms this revolt has generated have been of two kinds. There has been large-scale administrative change of the kind now going on in Ontario and there have been changes at the local school and district levels. Nikiforuk thinks that many of the administrative reforms have been ill-conceived and that most of the really promising changes have occurred at the local level. These effective local reforms, he says, show certain common elements across the country.

Andrew Nikiforuk

In successful schools, they've decided that the best education is the best for all, which means that we'll have a core set of standards. If we have standards, we'll have to have a curriculum that supports those standards, so we'll make sure we have an excellent curriculum. In other words, we'll have a guide for all of our teachers. And then we'll give these teachers ways to measure how effectively they are travelling and their children are travelling. So we'll have tests and we'll do that on a regular basis. And we'll do it, not because we like testing and all that stuff, we'll do it because we need the feedback. We need to know what the kids know, so that we can change our programs that are not working. And in the end, what that all means is that the key decisions have to be made at the school. Not at the Ministry, not at the Board, not in the union office, but at the school.

David Cayley

Andrew Nikiforuk thinks that independent, locally-controlled schools are the key to improving education. The paradox of school reform over the last few years has been that it has frequently centralized control over the school system. Instead of addressing the problem of top down decision-making in education, new educational laws have perpetuated it. Typical, says Nikiforuk, was New Brunswick's recent abolition of school boards.

Andrew Nikiforuk

They got rid of the school boards, but they didn't give their schools any authority. The Ministry is essentially in charge of all the schools. What they removed, in fact, was a place where both the public and the government could meet together and discuss things. And that happened to be the Board. Now, the boards weren't terribly effective, but now there's virtually no discussion between the public and the people running the schools because it has been centralized to such a high degree.

And what New Brunswick should have done was say, okay, we're going to get rid of the boards, let's go all the way and say we'll make the schools responsible for hiring teachers, and the role we'll play is that we'll set up an independent agency that sets the standards and provides a way to measure those standards and we'll set up another clearing house agency that will provide information to schools on programs that actually work. So that when schools say, look, we've got kids in our Grade II who can't add worth a damn, what do you suggest we do, they can go to the clearing house and

say, look, these schools have used these programs. Here are their success rates. Here's the research behind this program. Maybe you'd like to do this. If so, we can provide the money to help train your teachers and, bang, off you go. But that still would be a foreign idea to the people running New Brunswick's schools.

David Cayley

The same criticism, according to Andrew Nikiforuk, applies to other provinces as well. British Columbia attempted to introduce its progressive Year 2000 reform program from the top down. Ontario's conservative reforms show the same centralizing totalitarian streak. In both cases, the ingredient Nikiforuk thinks most needful, local autonomy, is missing. The real test of this autonomy, he says, is whether the school has the power to hire its own staff and therefore to develop its own character. Union rules now usually stand in the way, he says, but there are places where this obstacle is being overcome.

Andrew Nikiforuk

This whole idea of matching teachers to the philosophy and tenor of the school and the community is really, really important and this doesn't mean the end of teacher unions at all. In Seattle, the public school board there has just signed a contract with its teachers that allows for this very thing, that individual schools can hire the people they feel will get the job done and can work with the rest of the staff. So in a sense, what you have is two contracts with the teachers — one general contract that takes care of the economics and all that sort of stuff, so teachers don't have to worry about not being paid, not having a pension and all that jazz. But your second contract is with the school, and that contract covers things like how you'll be held accountable for what you do. In other words, how well the kids learn will be taken into consideration in terms of evaluating how well you teach. Pretty central idea. And that's part of the second contract. So you're being hired by a local school to do a job, to be part of a team, as opposed to being hired by a big board to be moved around like cattle, essentially. And the current system really treats teachers like cattle or like turkeys. Because if you're a really bad teacher, what happens is that you go on something that's actually called the 'turkey trot.' You get bounced from one school to another school to another school in the board. Or you start being bounced around outside and into another board and on and on you go. But you can never be fired. And that's appalling. We're talking about kids. Kids deserve the best. Would that be accepted anywhere else in society? Why should it be accepted in our school system? It's a legacy of 19th century unionism to protect workers. Now, that's a good idea. I believe in protecting workers, but I don't believe in inflicting bad work on children. And so we have to have mechanisms for those people to exit and exit gracefully. And one of the ways to do that is simply say, okay, we'll let the school do the hiring and the firing.

David Cayley

Local control, in Nikiforuk's view, is a necessary complement to accountability. If schools are to be held accountable for achieving the public purposes for which they have been established, they must hold the capacity to achieve these purposes in their own hands. Public education, by his account, fell under the domination of a radical professional monopoly and cut itself off from the communities it is supposed to serve. These communities have now reasserted themselves and in the process revived a traditional account of education as an upbringing into competence and responsibility. This popular revolt, he says, is sometimes wrongly understood as an emanation of the ideological right. What it really is, in his view, is an expression of instinctive popular conservatism.

Andrew Nikiforuk

Education is a conserving activity. We are taking the best stories, the wisest stories, the greatest

narratives, and we're passing them on to our children. And we're saying with these you might be able to make sense of the world. Without them, the world will only make sense out of you. And that's why I find the whole left-wing, right-wing thing a legacy of another time, another era. It doesn't reflect at all the debate about schooling, doesn't reflect the fact that in the course of my three years of writing the column for the *Globe and Mail*, I talked to teachers who were socialists, who were advocating for higher standards and more testing and rigorous curriculum. I talked to teachers who were fundamentalist Christians who were arguing for the same thing. I talked to middle class parents. I talked to blue collar parents. I talked to single moms. I talked to folks on welfare. You name it. And they had a popular idea of what schooling could achieve. And they were speaking as part of communities that were concerned, who were concerned about the erosion of the commons. And that's why what has gone wrong with schools is an ecological issue, just as fundamental as what went wrong with our fisheries, what went wrong with our forestry. It comes back to the importance of getting away from mass things and getting back to more local decision-making, more local control combined with excellent standards. And excellent standards are standards that stand the test of time. The best way to manage a forest is to think about how people managed it two thousand, three thousand years ago and still had a forest to talk about today. And that's what it comes down to basically in education as well. We have to conserve those things.

David Cayley

Andrew Nikiforuk holds that most of the clamour in education is a popular attempt to call a smug "we know best" bureaucracy to account. Heather-Jane Robertson is more or less of the opposite opinion, and at a recent conference of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, she debated with Nikiforuk. Her view is succinctly expressed in the title of a book she published with Maude Barlow in 1994. It's called Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools, and in it, she and Barlow argue that a coordinated right-wing movement for educational reform is manipulating parental anxieties, undermining equality in public education and ultimately threatening the very existence of a public school system. Heather-Jane Robertson began her career as an elementary school teacher in Saskatoon at the beginning of the 1970s. She went on to become the first woman employed in a staff position by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and today is the Director of Professional Development for the Canadian Teachers Federation. As well as Class Warfare, she has also recently published No More Teachers, No More Books, which warns against the corruption of public education by commercial interests. Robertson argues that the drive to reform public education is being fuelled by a series of hostile myths, for example, that standards are falling.

Heather-Jane Robertson

Every generation has said that the generation following it seems much less bright and that what they've learned is much less rigorous. My own experience is that my children began reading in Grade IX and X in public high school short stories, plays and novels that I didn't encounter until second or third year university, back when education was rigorous. That my kids are doing math and science that I didn't touch until university, back when education was rigorous. You can't generalize from my experience but I don't know that we can generalize from other people's grumpiness, either. Is our interest in history and literature and young people's capacity to communicate in traditional ways declining? I'd be amazed if it wasn't. I mean, our general respect for attention to detail, depth and stuff that isn't animated has declined significantly. Why should we think that our young people become different human beings when they're inside schools than when they're outside in terms of what they value and pay attention to? That would be pretty foolish. It's

almost impossible for schools to value different things than society does. I have a hard time looking around at the world and saying, now this is really a culture and society that values history. People appear to value writing letters complaining about the fact that other people don't know history. But there's remarkably little use of it in day-to-day life. It would be really nice if all 14-year-olds found Greek and Roman tales and early modern history and modern history fascinating. But they don't. It's a difficult subject area to teach. It does annoy me when the problem of kids not knowing history is ascribed to teacher indolence or bureaucratic neglect or, worse yet, propaganda valuing minute-to-minute superficial experience. I think it's very unfair for us to criticize schools for having more or less the same characteristics as society.

David Cayley

The second myth that Robertson challenges concerns the relations of education and the economy. It is often said that education is the key to economic success and that we must therefore renovate our education system to bring it in line with new economic conditions. Barlow and Robertson quote a vice-president of Northern Telecom whose rhetoric is extreme but not that untypical. "Canada is involved in a war," he says, "and education is the training ground for our armies to win on the global battlefield." The corollaries are, first, that we need to produce more skilled workers and, second, that if we do, our economic situation will improve. Both are largely nonsense, according to Robertson, and unfairly displace responsibility for unmanageable economic realities onto the education system.

Heather-Jane Robertson

It becomes very convenient to blame unemployment on the unemployed. That is really what the skills argument is. It's saying that the reason there are so many people with poor jobs or no jobs at all is that they don't have the right skills, they didn't learn the right things. Gee, and that must be the fault of schools. Now, from a political point of view, or from a corporate point of view, what a perfect fall guy. If we can set up schools to take the heat for joblessness and unemployment, oh, and throw in laziness and lack of industry and deceitfulness and all the rest of the things, what a terrific package. You can see how it allows a downloading of political responsibility and escaping of responsibility that suits politicians and the corporate world perfectly. And the kind of facts that we used in 'Class Warfare' that there was no skills shortage, there was a job shortage, I continued to point out in this most recent book, particularly looking at technological skills, because that's the new spin on this argument that's been around for the last five or six years. It is now said that technology will be what guarantees you a job in the future, particularly if you start using that technology at about age six or seven. I mean, it's a horrible, spurious, deceitful argument but if we're anxious enough, apparently we're prepared to believe it.

David Cayley

The actual case, Robertson argues, is that educational attainment has no significant influence on the supply of jobs. The CBC, to take a homely example, has shrunk its workforce by half since 1984. Many private corporations have done the same. And this is what has created the chronic shortage of jobs, she says, not any lack of skilled graduates from our educational institutions.

Heather-Jane Robertson

There's absolutely no evidence that more people with these skills would produce more jobs.. What they do is produce more competition for the jobs that exist and, in turn, drive down the cost of labour. There's nothing that helps a corporation out more than having five people compete for the same job. This drives down the cost of the job and it also becomes, as they say, a tool to discipline the

workforce: "Don't get uppity, you could be replaced in a blink of my eye. And by the way, if you're even thinking about joining a union, I have a little pamphlet for you to read about unemployment." Having a subdued, subservient and well-disciplined workforce via unemployment fits in with the restructuring-from-the-right plan that's gone on in every country. To imagine that we need a greater percentage of the population, particularly the young population, to have certain skills and to think that that would solve the problem really flies in the face of the facts. Stats Canada says 90% of all those between the ages of 18 and 24 describe themselves as computer literate. That's considerably higher than the employment rate for that age group. I was talking about this at dinner with friends the other night and we decided to test our theory by asking the waiter and the person who brought the drinks and the busboy serving our table what their education backgrounds were. And we had a B.Com., a M. Ed. and someone who already had an arts degree and was trying to get into a technology program waiting on our table in succession. I mean, I rest my case. Their problem is clearly not lack of skills.

David Cayley

Behind arguments about the need for more skills and greater academic rigour, Robertson sees another agenda. She believes academically tougher schools are a way of shifting blame onto the heads of the growing number of people with no prospect of rewarding employment by making them responsible for their own failure.

Heather-Jane Robertson

The problem is not how do you educate the best, brightest and richest. I mean, frankly, that has never been very difficult. You see, the political problem becomes what do you do with the other 80%? So public education, which has always erred on the side of soothing, subduing and training the under-class, now has a larger and larger permanent under-class to deal with. So most of the pressure that I hear around things like rigour and technology and standards has to do with finding ways to dis-entitle more of this 60 or 80% that's shifting toward the bottom and those that can't be outright disentitled can at least be made numb by their education.

David Cayley

Heather-Jane Robertson believes that reforms being undertaken in the name of rigour and job readiness are dis-entitling less privileged students. This is the crux of her argument about the vulnerability of public education and you'll hear more from her on this subject in subsequent programs. Andrew Nikiforuk, the populist, believes that demands for school reform express the inherent conservatism and good sense of ordinary citizens. Robertson believes school reform is the entering wedge of an increasingly unequal social order in which public goods will become sources of private profit. She sees evidence of this advancing order, and here I'll conclude tonight's program, in the emphasis reformers put on the rights of parents.

Heather-Jane Robertson

One of the shifts that endangers public education the most is the notion that it should matter only to parents. And over and over again, those who want to ask me questions about education will say things like, oh gee, that's very serious, what should parents do, as if they are the natural and legitimate group to respond to and be concerned about public education. And every time I have to stop and say, listen, we all fund public education. We democratically elect its decision-makers because schools do not belong to this year's crop of parents. That's a very recent way of thinking about schools. If they're the foundation of democracy, if they are creating society, not just serving a crop of customers, then we all have an investment in how well they're doing. We all suffer if they do poorly. And to have people say, "I'm really not paying any attention to education, I don't have any

kids in school,” seems to me sort of the equivalent of saying, “Well I don’t care what happens to health care, I’m not sick this week.” It’s just as short-sighted. We have to try to drag those who are consciously citizens in this country towards engaging in the problems of public education and seeing them as fundamentally political problems. All of us, with children or not, must engage in this very difficult and probably never-ending conversation about what is worth learning and how do we build a system that helps more people learn what’s worth learning? Yes, it’s a frustrating and difficult question, but it simply can’t be left to the people who are most vulnerable to having their fears manipulated and their kids harmed, short-term. I mean, I can see how it’s an advantage politically because given the demographics of the population, if you can reduce the education problem to the business only of this year’s crop of parents, you have reduced activists quite substantially. It fits perfectly into a customer service and market mentality. The customer’s always right, parents are customers, therefore parents are always right. That view seems to me to present a widely unrecognized danger.